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Summary

Views on God and Man in Dutch Autobiographical Literature about the Nazi Concentration Camps

For this study I have divided the Dutch autobiographical writings about the nazi concentration camps into diaries and letters (11, of which 8 are Jewish, 2 Christian and 1 communist), Jewish memoirs (37), Christian memoirs (35, subdivided into Protestant and Roman-Catholic), and non-religious memoirs (31).

On the whole Dutch concentration camp writings show the same formal characteristics as international Holocaust literature: the majority is told chronologically from a single perspective, in either the first or the third person. A third-person narration occurs more often in the earlier than in the later writings. In the non-religious memoirs there are noticeably more texts with (traces of) fictional techniques blurring the autobiographical background than in Christian and Jewish memoirs.

Most memoirs take their starting point in the arrival in the camp. But Jewish memoirs may also begin with the happy family life before the war, whereas Christian memoirs often begin with the arrest and the questioning, or sometimes with the acts of resistance which led to the arrest. Many writings end with the liberation, but Jewish and non-religious memoirs often describe the troublesome journey home. Some memoirs are structured more thematically with chapters about roll call, labour, hunger, health and diseases, punishments, and so on. Lapses in time may indicate a hidden trauma; some writers for instance are silent about the death marches. Two authors (Koopman and Nicholls) show in their composition, alternating past and present, camp and post war professional life, how memories affect their daily lives, a theme also typical of some of Hellema's short stories.

Sometimes the narrator uses, consciously or not, a special style to show his personality, such as pious or biblical language by clergymen (Knoop), heated indignation by a young woman (Blits), classical associations by a well-educated intellectual (Hemelrijk). In this respect Abel Herzberg presents a special case. In his diary in Bergen-Belsen, he writes about his work for the Jewish Court of Law and gives extensive reflections on Judaism and anti-Semitism, using a fluent, elaborate

style, but when he tells about the conditions in the camp his sentences are short and clipped. It is as if he wants to connect with his former self, the generally respected, well informed opinion leader, establishing a continuity in his existence that is denied by the camp system. In general there is no emphatic use of traditional rhetoric means, with the (rare) exception of a refrain sentence, a Biblical verse (Knoop, Corrie ten Boom) or 'He did not come back' at the end of a description of a passing character (Hemelrijk) or 'If only the government in London…' as a reproachful conclusion at the death of Dutch fellow-prisoners (De Nève). In Herzberg's diary the rhetorical question is frequently used, either as a way to involve the reader more closely into his pondering (in the reflections), or to pass over his uncertainty about the immediate future (in the camp parts).

Irony is used as a means of establishing a relationship with the reader, and also as a way by which to elevate oneself above the situation, to be in control instead of being an unresisting victim. It is more often to be seen in diaries than in memoirs. The main objects of irony are the narrator himself and the perpetrators (both SS and grey zone), fellow-prisoners far less. There is only room for humour and irony when the hardship is not too severe; no irony is used in the description of the last days of Bergen-Belsen, of the selections for the gas chamber or of the death marches. A common form of irony is stressing the contrast between the pretences of the Germans, being 'Übermenschen', and their actual inferior behaviour, and sometimes the contrast between the former social status of prisoners and their present moral and material poverty.

Some of the memoirs, having acquired a literary status, I studied in more detail: Oberski (*Childhood*), Durlacher (*Stripes in the Sky* a.o.) and the short stories by Hellema. Oberski's novella is told consequently from the perspective of a very young child, using elementary language in accordance with its age: simple sentences, no metaphors, no judgments or reflections. This style is very effective in showing the vulnerability and naivety of a young child, trusting every grown-up, and completely dependant on his mother. When she dies, his world is shattered and he is not able to trust and to bond with his foster parents. His childhood is gone for good.

Durlacher writes from the perspective of a middle-aged man who survived the Holocaust as a teenager. His memoirs are triggered by reading historical books about the Allied knowing about the 'Endlösung', but not putting this into action to end it (the title *Stripes in the sky* refers to allied aircrafts bombing an industrial complex

near Auschwitz but not the gas chambers or the railway). *The Search* is about the reunion of a group of boys with whom he survived in Auschwitz, and the search for the reason why they were spared at a selection. *Quarantaine* ('Quarantine', not translated into English) is mainly about Westerbork, the last story being about the arrival in Holland after the war and his efforts to go back to an ordinary life. In moments of tension and (imminent) crisis, Durlacher's text shows an increase of metaphors and grammatical abnormalities. The metaphors, images often deriving from water, weather and forces of nature, express the main character's feeling of powerlessness. Sometimes the images are from a distant past or from exotic spheres, expressing the utter strangeness of the events and the impossibility of connecting them to normal life. The grammatical abnormalities express a certain dimension of the narrated experience, for instance the monotony of camp duties, or the rapid succession of noise and vibrations during a bombing raid.

It is interesting to see the difference between Hellema's first book of short stories and his last publication, an anthology of his camp-stories. In the latter he shows himself more doubtful about writing literature about the Holocaust, he arranges the stories more chronologically, dropping the seemingly but not really autobiographical stories. The final choice stresses more the loneliness of the main character, and leaves out the few metaphysical experiences that consoled and strengthened him in his first book.

My conclusion is that literary devices are aimed not so much at expressing ambivalence and ambiguity, as at getting the reader emotionally involved in the narrated events. Dutch Holocaust memoirs do not seek literary experiment, even less than the international Holocaust literature does. Postmodern novels and second-generation literature however are excluded from my research, being not directly autobiographical as far as the concentration camp is concerned.

The Dutch diaries and memoirs do not stand out in reflecting the renewal in theological thinking of the 20th century. The Jewish texts reflect the secularisation of the Dutch Jewish community since the 19th century: there are not many authors who write about their religious ideas and beliefs, although many tell that their parents or grandparents lived according to orthodox rules. Abel Herzberg, Etty Hillesum (more so in her Amsterdam diary than in her Westerbork letters), Clara Asscher-Pinkhof and Max Bueno de Mesquita are the most explicit in their ideas about Jewish religion. For

Herzberg, who had the task of administering justice over his fellow prisoners in the camp, the ethical dimension is the most important. According to him, monotheism is the beginning of the awareness of justice as a ruling principle that replaces the law of the jungle. God is not much more than the representation of this principle of justice. But when the circumstances in Bergen-Belsen get tougher, nearing the unbearable, there are signs in his diary that this abstract image of God is not enough for him, and that he yearns for a transcendent God who will make an end to his ordeal, and who will sit in Judgment on victims and perpetrators after death, when the perpetrators can do nothing but hope for a greater mercy than they themselves have shown. The development in the thinking of Etty Hillesum and Max Bueno de Mesquita is the other way around: their image of God was traditionally transcendent and becomes more immanent (although with Hillesum both positions are valid simultaneously). Asscher-Pinkhof holds on to the Jewish-orthodox rituals, she teaches the children stories form the Bible, sings religious songs and organizes feasts like Chanouka and Seider, as do the diary-writers Mirjam Bolle and David Koker. They recognize themselves in the Bible stories, but none of them explicitly questions the meaning of e.g. the liberation from Egypt in their current situation. Asscher-Pinkhof and Bolle are among the lucky who left Bergen-Belsen in the Palestine-transport in June 1944. With the exception of Hillesum all of the above-mentioned were Zionists or had Zionist sympathies (Koker was looked upon as a Zionist by others, he himself was ambivalent about his position). Not surprisingly there are also writers who lose their faith in God, such as the doctor Elie Cohen. He finds it hard to accept that very religious men were the first to die, while men who let themselves be sterilized (thus cooperating in the extermination of the Jewish people) had better chances of survival. The writers who lost their faith do not wish to give up their Jewish identity, and they maintain the rituals like circumcision and fasting on Jom Kippur. Only two of the Jewish writers emigrated to Israel. In some of the Jewish texts, biblical metaphors are used for giving a meaning contrary to the original biblical image or expression, for instance the Red Sea that cannot be crossed, ‘Ecce homo’ to show man in his cruelty instead of his pitifulness, man as created in the image of God in a description of totally indifferent German citizens.

The Christian writers show quite a different picture, due to the fact that most of them were clergymen, while the vast majority of them published their memoirs shortly after the war. They stay within the boundaries of traditional Christianity (with

the exception of two women: the catholic Anne Berendsen, in 1946, and the free-thinking protestant Jenneke Romkes, in 1987). Clearly the intention is to testify to their faith and to show the strength they received from it. Some of them attribute their survival to God's will and tell about the way their prayers were concretely answered. This is a striking difference with the Jewish authors, none of whom ever expresses such a claim. The obvious explanation is that it is difficult to adhere to this belief when so many of one's family and friends perished, whereas most Christian survivors found their social environment intact after the war. The Christian writers felt themselves in God's hand; they experienced their suffering often as a punishment or a purification or a lesson to reach a deeper faith. The punishment is seldom felt as if it were for a concrete and personal sin. Such an interpretation of their suffering is rarely found with Jewish writers. Both the strength they take from their Judaism and the explanations they give for their persecution are less individual, but rather based on their being part of the Jewish community as a whole. Elie Cohen is the only one who experiences his suffering as a consequence of his refusal to emigrate to Palestine when he had the opportunity, finding it more bearable to suffer for a reason than for no reason at all.

Faith offers a way with which to resist the dehumanization ruling the camps. Jewish writers see their fate in a religious-historical perspective; Christian writers maintain their feeling of individuality in the knowledge of being important as a person in the eyes of God. Many of the clergymen, including the evangelist Corrie ten Boom, state that they are placed in the camp by God himself for a purpose, either of spreading the gospel, or sustaining the weak belief and morals of the prisoners, or – for the Roman-Catholic priests – administering the Holy Communion. They feel being called as minister to the camp. Many identify with the suffering of Christ; there is even one Jewish writer who does so. When doubts occur, they are always overcome; some have difficulty with the commandment to love one's enemy and the (second part of the) prayer to be forgiven as we forgive who trespasses against us.

For the picture of the views on man I distinguish between the image of oneself and the image of fellow-prisoners, the grey zone (a phrase first used by Primo Levi to indicate inmates of the camp who were given power over their fellow-prisoners, being victims and perpetrators at the same time), perpetrators and bystanders.

In general, the self-image is positive. Jewish authors tend to picture themselves as enterprising and resourceful, although others emphasize the ever present uncertainty about the consequences of one's decisions. Christian authors focus on their spoken word, for instance the way they retort their interrogators or the way they preach and uphold the morality of their fellow-prisoners. Non-religious writers, mostly so-called political prisoners, stress their being resourceful and a good comrade to others (but there are also writers in this group who picture themselves as a loner, such as Yvo Pannekoek and Hellema). Obviously these distinctions are rough and fluid: Jewish and Christian authors also write about themselves as good comrades, Christians may be resourceful, and non-religious narrators may be proud of their retorts to Nazis or fellow-inmates. The positive self-image is a way in which to counter the dehumanization intended by the camp system.

Another aspect of the self-image is the feeling of guilt. Survivor's guilt occurs specifically, but not exclusively in Jewish texts. As a variant some non-religious authors state: the best were the first to go. Authors who at one point or another had belonged to the grey zone examine their behaviour and the damage they caused to others. The way Elie Cohen and Andries Kaas, both doctors, and both psychiatrists in their post-war lives, look upon their guilt, is studied in detail. It is remarkable that Kaas is more bothered by the damage he caused unknowingly (for instance by advising the sick to leave Buchenwald for fear of elimination, thus sending them into the horrible death-marches) than by the conscious actions such as selecting untrustworthy prisoners for deadly transports to other labour-camps, under the authority of more prominent members of the communist grey zone. Elie Cohen feels responsible for the death of his young son, whom he let come out of hiding to Westerbork, where he felt safe as a doctor. But he feels more guilty about a schizophrenic patient he had to kill in Auschwitz to safe his own skin. Cohen speaks about it in interviews in 1948 and 1971 and in his memoirs in 1992. These texts show an increasing attention for his dilemmas, but the self-accusation is the most fierce in 1971. In the most recent text he is more responsive to the view that one cannot apply the same standards in a death camp as in ordinary life. The honesty with which he probes his actions and motives in the course of these various texts is impressive. Something similar can be seen in the memoir of a pair of protestant clergymen, Lieve and Ter Steege, who examine scrupulously their anti-Semitic feelings in the camp of Amersfoort. Many authors of all three categories write about their becoming numbed

to the suffering of other inmates. Sometimes this numbness is a conscious strategy, put on as a harness. It is looked upon without guilt by the writers of memoirs, being aware that it was necessary for their survival. Diary-writers have more difficulty with their growing numbness, but in some cases the text doesn't reflect the numbness that is stated emphatically: Dirk Folmer calls himself completely blunted, but time and again describes with indignation the cruelty to the Jews he witnesses in Amersfoort.

As to the fellow-prisoners it is noteworthy that the diaries and early memoirs are more critical than the more recent texts. Partly this may be due to the fact that the Dutch camps, Amersfoort and Vught, are the subject matter only in the early texts (when the facts about Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Dachau became known, people hardly wrote about the relatively – the relativity should be stressed! – less severe Dutch camps anymore). And in these camps not only political prisoners were held, but also black marketeers and so-called antisocial persons. In general, authors often are disillusioned by the low moral standards of their fellow-prisoners. The image is much more positive when a text concentrates on the (small) group of friends or kindred spirits. In some memoirs such friendships occupy an important place in the narrated events; the moral support is even more significant than the practical help and the sharing of food. In philosophical conversations, storytelling and singing people could momentarily escape from the oppressive reality and feel a person again. Women tend to stress the importance of friendships more than male writers, especially Hanna Hammelburg-de Beer, Anne Berendsen and Tineke Wibaut-Guilonard, but Jules Schelvis, Hans Andriesse and Floris Bakels also tell about their small groups of friends. Interestingly Cohen only tells about such a group in the early interviews, in laudatory phrases, but does not mention it in the later texts, whereas more recent memoirs are generally more positive about the fellow-prisoners. Many authors reflect on the different nationalities they meet in the camp. Nearly always the Dutch are looked upon very favourably: they show solidarity and integrity, speak foreign languages (understanding each other, especially the Germans, helps a great deal in survival), and they refuse to bow and scrape for the SS. By so doing, however, they seldom have the good jobs in the grey zone and are not able to help their countrymen. Poles and Russians are judged very unfavourably, but sometimes it is noted with respect that they can cope better with the camp being used to oppression and a harsh climate.

Some authors, first of all Abel Herzberg, highly praise the few inmates who are able to maintain their human dignity and are always ready to help others. Westerbork authors are sometimes irritated by the orthodox Jews, but in German and Polish camps some of these stubbornly hold on to orthodox rules, such as not eating unclean meat, and this stubbornness is greatly respected, both by believers and non-believers. The same goes for Jehovah's Witnesses, who impress both Jewish and non-religious writers with their high principles; Christian writers are more critical, they condemn the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses are exclusively oriented to their own circle. Christian clergymen appreciate the open, ecumenical contact between protestant and catholic colleagues (and also the warm contact with communists and social-democrats), but some non-clergymen criticize the church boundaries that exist even in the camp. And indeed, there are examples both of protestant and catholic priests who revel in the superiority of their own religion.

The appreciation of the grey zone varies, according to its behaviour. In general, a grey zone consisting of political, 'red', prisoners, mostly communists (often imprisoned since the thirties and thus later on holding the better positions), makes a camp more bearable than a grey zone consisting of criminal, 'green', prisoners. But the 'red' grey zone in Dachau and Sachsenhausen behaved very harshly to the imprisoned clergymen and the communist grey zone in Amersfoort is denounced for its shouting and severe ill-treatment, except by fellow-communists. It is often stated that the grey zone is just as bad as the SS, and not seldom even worse. In some texts the grey zone is not looked upon as a group in itself, but wholly as part of the fellow-prisoners, or of the SS. Most survivor-writers have been in the grey zone at one time or another; the more structural this position was, the more positive the judgement naturally is. Some authors elaborate on the dangers of a position in the grey zone, stressing that the decisions taken were for the benefit of inmates as a whole (e.g. Kaas), others consider themselves to be not fit for the job, not being able to beat or shout.

Not surprisingly the perpetrators are thought of very negatively. The vices mentioned most are cruelty, stupidity, laziness, cowardice and lewdness. Some see the SS as sadistic, others disagree, because the necessary relationship with the victim is not existent: for the SS the victims are not human. Apart from sadism the motives for their behaviour are sought in feelings of social inferiority and jealousy of the socio-economic and intellectual level of the prisoners (especially the Jewish). Christian

writers are more inclined than others to see SS-men as fellow human beings, and to recognize that they themselves are essentially just as bad, needing God's grace just as much. Most memoirs pay attention to the individual positive exceptions, examples of unexpected kindness or help. Because the SS in general is not a very prominent theme in these texts, the positive exceptions contribute substantially to the image of the perpetrators (although it is never forgotten that indeed they are exceptions). But only so in the memoirs, and more in late than in early texts; the diaries hardly ever tell about positive exceptions.

In the image of the bystanders a shift in the opposite direction is to be seen. The diary-writers, who receive sustaining letters and food packages from family and friends, are very positive (note that writing a diary in the worst camps was practically impossible). They feel no anger towards the Dutch non-Jewish population; on the contrary, they appreciate every shred of help and sympathy (e.g. the Dutch military police who perform the custodial tasks without zeal). In the Jewish memoirs, the attitude of the Dutch pre-war population is praised, with gratitude the strike of February 1941 is mentioned, or citizens who warn for imminent raids, or show their respect for Jews wearing the yellow star for the first time. Memoirs recounting the journey back home and the years after the war, however, tell about post-war anti-Semitism, the inability of Dutch society to understand the hell the survivors had gone through and the unwillingness to listen to their stories. The political prisoners are somewhat more critical about pre-war Holland. They reproach the population for continuing their daily life during the war as if nothing happened, sitting on terraces, going to cinemas (mainly showing propaganda movies), signing the Aryan-declaration. But memories of helpful and sympathetic citizens prevail. The positive image of Dutch bystanders is severely damaged due to the lax and indifferent treatment by the Dutch Red Cross and the Dutch authorities, who fail to send food packages to Dutch prisoners (whereas the French and Norwegian Red Cross do so in abundance) and do not undertake any action for repatriation afterwards. The non-religious writers are the sharpest in their angry condemnation, feeling they sacrificed their lives to their country and not getting any help in return. The image of German and Polish bystanders is very negative. They are met during transport to labour or to other camps, encountering the prisoners at best with indifference or fear, but just as often with mockery, throwing of stones, spitting and abuse. Most authors do not believe the protestations of German citizens of not having known what happened in

the camps. Sometimes the Germans are seen as living in constant fear and as being prisoners of their own government. Confronted with the demolition of German cities by allied bombs, feelings of justice and even joy occur as often as pity and sorrow. Early writings are fiercer in their condemnation of the German people and the way they should be treated than the later ones.

Views of mankind in general are often prompted by fellow-prisoners and grey zone. Here the human condition is best to be seen, man being a victim and a perpetrator at the same time. The explicit view that civilization is only a varnish is common, but implicitly many diaries and memoirs also show how deeply rooted qualities such as solidarity, friendship and caring are. Thus, in the Dutch diaries and memoirs, a confirmation can be found of the views Tzvetan Todorov (in *Face à l'extrême*) and Terrence Des Pres (in *The Survivor*) derived from international camp literature.